TREES
1
20pp
WARREN ELLIS

The Trees: are massive alien objects that landed on earth 10 years ago. Like giant pedestals – things with three to five legs, that are up to a mile high. They have no windows, holes or other features. Each one is slightly different in some way, most often in height. They landed, apparently at random – and did nothing.

PAGE ONE

Pic 1
JASON, THIS IS YOUR TALL PANEL.

Bright sky. A makeshift kite with half a dozen cellphones stuck to it is high in the sky (and high in the panel), above the shitty ziggurats of a Rio favela (at bottom of panel, prob barely visible). DISPLAY LETT is SIC, needs to be up in the top left:

DISPLAY LETT: **Ten years after**

Pic 2
Top panel on the second column: a fake Google Maps-style capture of Rio, so we can see the legend RIO DE JANEIRO – overdraw it a bit, doesn't have to be a straight capture, you get the idea...

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
On the ground, a few kids, one holding the string of the kite, another looking at a phone held in landscape, another TALKING on a phone. LETTERER NOTE – TRUNCATED END OF SECOND BALLOON IS DELIBERATE

TALKING We can see them from up high. We can see them right on Murillo's phone. It's Pacification Police.

TALKING They're right behind you, and they've got

Pic 4
And the TALKING kid's head has a big chunk of it blown away by a bullet from above. DISPLAY LETT is SIC.

DISPLAY LETT **they landed.**

PAGE TWO

Pic 1
CUT TO: two small quadcopter drones above -- the kite is now on fire, smashed and drifting up and away. And the quadcopters each have two guns on, on motorised wheels so they can angle their fire, and are firing down.

DISPLAY LETT is SIC all the way through here.

DISPLAY LETT **All over the world**

Pic 2
CUT TO: seen from above, a gang of say FOUR? Young Brazilians running through a narrow passage between buildings. Parity between boys and girls.

DISPLAY LETT a**s if there were no-one here.**

Pic 3
CUT TO: the same gang seen from in front of them as they run towards us: behind them, we see a set of steep steps that they would have had to run down. The gang – all early twenties at best, all armed with cheap pistols – are running in wild panic.

DISPLAY LETT **And they did nothing**

Pic 4
And two HEADLESS DOGLIKE ROBOTS leap down those stairs in hot pursuit. Also marked POLICIA.

DISPLAY LETT **and did not speak**

PAGE THREE

Pic 1
And, just to drive you insane, let's go behind those dogs, and the riot-suited POLICIA (stencils on their backs) behind them, and stand up a little high and look down so we see a whole chunk of the FAVELA beyond them, a shitbox ziggurat rolling down the hill before us. Want half the page for that? Brutal, I know, but when you pull this off people are going to think about you in new ways and realise just how fucking good you are.

DISPLAY LETT **as if there were no-one here**

Pic 2
Our gang jump over a fence and down on to the tin roof of a building on the next level down.

DISPLAY LETT **and nothing under foot.**

Pic 3
And tumble towards the right in a cloud of dust and crap as the place collapses under their weight.

(no dialogue)

PAGE FOUR

Pic 1
They pick up and scramble/run down a narrow street, gunfire from above and behind picking at their heels.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
One of the gang turns and fires back, as the first of the dogbots lands on the street, skidding from momentum.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
A lucky shot tears between plates and into the joints of one of the thing's legs, ripping up pipes and sparking wires.

(no dialogue)

Pic 4
It skids, in a ball of flame, into the front of someone's shitbox home.

DISPLAY LETT **Ten years since we learned**

Pic 5
The gang are running back up a slope, now, as flames bloom behind them.

A GANG MEMBER Come on! We're going to make it!

PAGE FIVE

Pic 1
And now we look back UP the favela, and we see that this favela is built up against and around the leg of a TREE. Half the page, again?

DISPLAY LETT **that there is intelligent life in the universe**

Pic 2
So let's get a good look at the leg. We've talked about this. The legs are fucking massive, making the favela housing constructed up against it look tiny.

DISPLAY LETT **but that they did not recognise us**

Pic 3
And, in this view, we see weird SLOTS open up all over the leg. I think maybe they're swirls, rather than simple geometric slots? Curves, anyway. Whatever you do, **these shapes are important for later.**

DISPLAY LETT **as intelligent**

Pic 4
And thick, evil, green, smoking slurry pours out of the slots, down on the favela.

DISPLAY LETT **or alive.**

PAGE SIX

Pic 1
Where it hits the buildings, the buildings DISSOLVE, collapse, smoulder, MELT...

DISPLAY LETT **They stand on the surface of the Earth like trees**

Pic 2
And the slurry washes down the street, hitting the gang, doing much the same to them as it does to everything around them.

DISPLAY LETT **exerting their silent pressure on the world**

Pic 3
Half the page: Pulling all the way back to see THE TREE standing over Rio, at least one leg in the sea, shadowing the Jesus statue on the hill. And the smoke coming out of Rio where the slurry has dumped from ALL the legs, and great billowing fumes where the leg in the sea meets the water, too….

DISPLAY LETT **as if there were no-one here.**

PAGE SEVEN

Pic 1
CUT TO: the last picture, but on a wall-mounted thin-screen TV set, with a news channel ident along the bottom: BLUE POST NEWS: and the stripline DISASTER UNDER RIO TREE. A black man's hand points into the panel, at the screen.

FROM OFF That.

FROM OFF That is why you cannot run for Mayor of New York City and not have a policy on Trees. Especially if you're going to run as a Democrat.

Pic 2
We are in a spacious office, one side of which is all floor to ceiling windows, and a thin black man (50s) in a three piece suit, DEL, is lecturing a stocky white man in his mid-30s or so, VINCE, who leans on his desk, because it's his office. Tie, suit trousers, rolled-up shirt sleeves, like he's a young Juan Peron.

VINCE I'm from Lower Manhattan. I don't need the history lesson.

DEL Well, apparently you do, because it was a Democratic President who tried to nuke New York.

DEL You need a policy. You need a speech. Or don't even run.

Pic 3
Vince folds his arms, smirks at a pacing Del.

VINCE I'm from Lower Manhattan. We know about Trees better than anyone else. Don't forget that.

DEL That's, what, the sixth time a Tree's dumped waste? You can't ignore that.

DEL Jesus, Vince. Why do you even want to be mayor? Is it just because that's what surreally rich guys like you do?

Pic 4
Vince nods at the window. DEL stops, turns, scowls.

GARY Look out the window, Del.

DEL I don't –

GARY Look out the fucking window.

PAGE EIGHT

Pic 1
So we look through the window, which looks out on Lower Manhattan. Which has a Tree leg through it. The Tree straddles the Hudson, I guess, but one leg went right through downtown NYC – and that end of the city, we can see from here, is FLOODED. And another thing about this Tree is that its legs have put out TENDRILS – some straight like cables, some thick like pipes, some twisting like, well, tendrils I guess, and they seem to worm through the buildings and into the water. But you know what? We're in midtown, and we're looking down and across, and it's misty out there, and we won't make out a lot of detail beyond the flooded nature of the place and the Tree leg... and a sense of chaotic buildings and tendrils and all is just sketchy... HALF THE PAGE.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
Through the window: Del looking out (looking bored), Vince standing behind him, thin-lipped. Probably three tall thin panels happening here?

VINCE — I was there ten years ago when they landed, Del.

VINCE — I remember the panic. “We're being invaded by alien spaceships!”

VINCE — I remember the fighter jets. I was there for the first flooding when the leg went through downtown.

Pic 3
Move in on Vince, and we see that he's actually getting angry.

VINCE — I remember days going by before we even found out it'd happened anywhere else.

VINCE — Weeks before we found out nukes and biochem inactivate when they go near a Tree.

VINCE — Months going by, and nobody ever coming out of one or communicating from one.

Pic 4
And Vince smiles, and it is frankly an evil fucking smile.

VINCE — I remember years later, when all the Trees became normal. Just things that stand on us.

VINCE — You know what I remember best?

VINCE — No cop lifting a finger. Fending for ourselves. Building our own infrastructure from debris.

PAGE NINE

Pic 1
While we're here, shall we have three widescreen detail shots of Lower Manhattan? Sweep right in on a street that's like ten meters underwater – the Tree leg is at least the size of a city block, and we look at an edge of it, at the water – we see it smeared in graffiti, and a couple of small boats going by – one outboard, maybe, but I'm thinking something like those shallow little boats you see pictures of at the floating market in Bangkok. Mist on the water.

VOICE (NO TAIL)	Hell, I remember the cops shooting people for crossing the waterline into Midtown. You remember that?
VOICE (NO TAIL)	New York City cops, Del. Just another street gang. You don't need me to tell you that.

Pic 2
And, like I said – big fat tendrils and pipes and cables that have grown out of the Tree, made of the same stuff. And we see here that they've gone right through buildings – there's not gonna be a building down here less than four floors high, and the flooding, I think, can vary from one to two floors high.

VOICE (NO TAIL)	And now we all act like it's normal. All this is normal.
VOICE (NO TAIL)	So you want to know why I want to be mayor?

Pic 3
Look around and pull back a bit. Lower Manhattan is Occupied, if you like: "new" temporary/adhoc housing has been constructed on and around those pipes and tubes and shit. Built between them. Narrow, shabby, clapped together out of whatever was around, some perhaps even floating on the water and hanging from cables thrown over the Tree extensions. Teeming with rat-like human life.

VOICE (NO TAIL)	The mayor gets to decide what's normal.
VOICE (NO TAIL)	And the mayor gets to choose the police commissioner.

PAGE TEN

Pic 1
CUT TO: On a dusty old rattletrap of a BUS, we find CHENGLEI, a man of perhaps 21, not a worldly young man.

http://mlkshk.com/r/UDNT

He doesn’t need the glasses, and not necessarily these colours or exactly this outfit, but: yeah. Nerdy art student who maybe looked at too many photos of Hockney one time. He's got a sketchbook and pencil in his hands, and is looking out the window.

CHENGLEI LETT is a DISPLAY LETT that needs to look handwritten, or perhaps written with a brush. Send me some tests.

CHENGLEI LETT **I felt like I was growing up twisted.**

Pic 2
Pull back: there are only a couple of other people on this whole bus. They're not looking outside.

CHENGLEI LETT **So I threw myself out on the wind.**

Pic 3
And outside: the bus heading up a long road towards the city of SHU in the distance. First off, let me show you this picture

http://phys.org/news/2013-09-china-industrial-revolution-newplanet.html

Second, Chinese pollution leads to desertification -- so it’s ALL desert around this city.

Third, there’s a TREE right over this city, and there’s a HIGH WALL all around the city -- the legs of the Tree are inside the wall.

Half the page. Again, at this distance, details are irrelevant, but, you know...

CHENGLEI LETT **With the dream of landing under a better sun.**

PAGE ELEVEN

Pic 1
CITY ENTRANCE CHECKPOINT: guarded by three or four members of the People's Armed Police, and two large armed police ground robots -- faceless things, no anthropomorphism, just machines. We only deal with one of the the police, an older man whom we'll call PAP, holding a clipboard, approaching Chenglai.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Armed_Police_(China)

CHENGLEI has one battered suitcase and one messenger-style satchel slung around him, and is dragging the bag to the checkpoint. Everything here is kind of yellowed and used. Wide shot, we're gonna be here for a little while.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
Fake me up a map entry here, that shows a city with one road leading to it, marked as

City of SHU

SPECIAL CULTURAL ZONE

Maybe use the pictogram too?

Pic 3
The PAP, holding a clipboard and pen, dealing with Chenglei, not really even looking at him. Chenglei is taking a beaten envelope out of one pocket.

PAP	Name?
CHENGLEI	Tian Chenglei.
PAP	Your resident identity card, special entrance permit, urban resident permit and domicile contract, Mr Tian.

Pic 4
PAP slips various cards and chits out of the envelope, looking at Chenglei for the first time, with a crooked eyebrow.

PAP	Why are you moving to Shu, Mr Tian?
CHENGLEI	I'm a, well, I want to be an artist. I'm an artist. I'm coming here to study and draw.
PAP	Seriously? You want to draw this fucking mess? You couldn't find a nice lake or forest to live by?

Pic 5
CHENGLEI gives a nervous little smile.

CHENGLEI	I mean no disrespect, sir, but I come from a village.
CHENGLEI	You run out of things to draw there quite quickly.

PAGE TWELVE

Pic 1
The PAP chuckles, looking over Chenglei's documents.

PAP — Ha! Well, I'll give you that, Mr Tian. You won't run out of things to draw here. This is your first time away from home, right?

CHENGLEI — Yes, sir.

PAP — Thought so. I grew up in a village, too. I remember the look in your eyes from my shaving mirror.

Pic 2
Head inclined, the PAP looks up over his brow at Chenglei: the smile's still there, just, but he's more serious.

PAP — Listen, son, there's a reason why we built a wall around this place and renamed it when the Tree landed on it.

PAP — It's like a big dish left alone on a shelf, and Beijing are just watching what grows in it. You sure you want to be part of that?

CHENGLEI — Yes, sir. I am.

Pic 3
The PAP slips a folded paper map out from under the sheets on his clipboard, all business now.

PAP — You are cleared to enter the Special Cultural Zone of Shu. Do you need a map?

CHENGLEI — I'd like one, sir, thank you.

PAP — I'll mark your place of residence on it. Look after it.

Pic 4
The PAP hands the envelope and the map back to Chenglei, but is looking around furtively as he does it. Doesn't want to be herd doing this.

PAP — And, ah…

PAP — Look. Draw fast. It's no crime or failure to leave Shu early and go home, okay?

PAP — Nothing lasts forever.

Pic 5
Page wide panel, I think? Mechanical gate grinds open, Chenglei drags his case through, but looking behind him, nervously, at the PAP.

(no dialogue)

PAGE THIRTEEN

Pic 1
Three wide panels, I think.

He goes down a road that's been turned into a corridor of sort, reinforced concrete on either side, open at the far end. Lights, smoke, bustle at the end, kind of blurred and abstracted, but here on the road he's alone.

CHENGLEI LETT **I felt like I was suspended in space.**

Pic 2
And he emerges into the city proper, where the road forms a crossroads. Lots of people on bicycles, a few (old, beaten) cars spewing exhaust. And the people themselves: a mix of sooty factory workers in plain uniforms, and a fairly surreal kind of Chinese version of countercultural freaks and geeks. Lots of handpainted signs, cheap flyposters, lanterns... Biggest panel on the page, I should think. Total, vast change from previous couple of pages.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
And here we just center Chenglei in the panel, head and shoulders, staring, jaw dropped.

CHENGLEI LETT **And I could not steer.**

PAGE FOURTEEN

Pic 1
A panel of Chenglei struggling through pedestrian bustle, maybe from slightly above? It's smoggy, too.

CHENGLEI LETT **I recognised nothing beneath me.**

Pic 2
And then, him looking up at a converted building – maybe once a factory? that’s now apartments. Certainly it was once as grey and utilitarian as a factory. The outside has gaudy swirls painted on it.

CHENGLEI LETT **The altitude of freedom was awful.**

Pic 3
He drags his case in through the front doors, past a couple of people who are asleep by the door in a small pile of bottles and cigarette packets.

CHENGLEI Hello?

Pic 4
Inside the hallway, emerging from the front office, is a man – and we're in China, by the way, so, stating the obvious, but everyone is Chinese unless I note otherwise, heh – a man in his sixties, wearing a frayed and dirty tuxedo, with long grey hair. (No beard.) Here's a thing – I kind of like the idea that he has coins tied into his hair, but I dunno if that'll work. This grinning lunatic's name is, quite simply, UNCLE.

UNCLE Aha!

UNCLE You would be young Chenglei, from Pigshit Village in scenic Incest Province, yes?

PAGE FIFTEEN

Pic 1
Uncle enthusiastically shakes an uncomprehending Chenglei's hand.

CHENGLEI Um. Sir, I have –

UNCLE Uncle! Everyone calls me Uncle!

UNCLE Your heavenly palace awaits. Number 505, on the fifth floor. We did have a lift, but somebody borrowed it. I think. Probably something extremely artistic.

Pic 2
And Uncle produces from his other hand a set of keys, still grinning insanely.

UNCLE Welcome, young Chenglei, to that which was Worker's Accomodation 793 on your very sensible map there.

UNCLE We changed its name, you see, to reflect our glorious purpose.

UNCLE Welcome aboard The Great Spaceship.

Pic 3
CUT TO: CHENGLEI dragging his shit up the concrete stairs. Someone's painted a space mural on the walls, and probably some of the stairs too.

CHENGLEI LETT **And then there was strange gravity.**

Pic 4
On a landing between flights of stairs, he presses himself into a corner as two girls in welding gear and heavy gloves and workboots and old army helmets wrestle a large and ungainly robot armature down past him.

GIRL 1 Watch your head! It's not that heavy, but it's sharp and it swings about a bit.

CHENGLEI Hi.

GIRL 2 Hi. Do you like it?

Pic 5
On Chenglei, just all at sea.

CHENGLEI I don't really know what it is yet.

PAGE SIXTEEN

Pic 1
From down a corridor, we look back at Chenglei dragging his case off the staircase on to this floor.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
Walking down the corridor, he passes an open door (502) can't help but look at the red light leaking from the eight inches or so of open door.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
Seen in the gap of the door: a stunning woman, ZHEN, great waves of black hair, tall and lustrous, in a black spandex bra, looking down -- this shot is from mid-section up, as she's looking down and –

(no dialogue)

Pic 4
In the process of, with one hand, holding open the front of a pair of spandex panties she痴 wearing, and, with the other, pushing her penis down into them.

(no dialogue)

Pic 5
ZHEN looks up at us, huge dark-rimmed smoky eyes, no expression, challenging.

(no dialogue)

Pic 6
Chenglei walks on, eyes wide, wondering where the hell he's landed. And I kinda like that image, so:

CHENGLEI LETT **Today I landed on a different planet.**

PAGE SEVENTEEN

Pic 1
OPEN ON: a BLACK FLOWER, like a small poppy.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
PULL BACK: to reveal it and a few others growing out of SNOW.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
PULL BACK: to reveal the patch of flowers several feet away from one leg of a TREE.

(no dialogue)

Pic 4
HALF THE PAGE: ARCTIC TREE, here at the frozen northern end of Spitzbergen. We're at one leg, but we're pulled way back, getting in a whole lot of the leg, a bunch of snow and ice, maybe the tiny figure of MARSH (next page)

(no dialogue)

PAGE EIGHTEEN

Pic 1
MARSH, male, forties, puttering around the base of one leg of the tree. Rifle slung across his back. More of the flowers are clustered around one side of the base. There's an orange research sensor standing by the leg, under the Tree, a robotic-looking thing on a wide plastic base, about two feet tall.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
He reaches the sensor: on the base of it, scrawled in thick Sharpie, is the word NAPOLEON. A few small black flowers are growing at the edge of the base.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
He bends to pull the flowers out, away from the base:

(no dialogue)

Pic 4
And we close in: as a couple of them are rooted, not in the ground, but in the plastic of the sensor base itself.

(no dialogue)

Pic 5
Close in: little holes in the orange plastic as the roots come out.

(no dialogue)

Pic 6
Marsh holds the flower and root up to look at it.

MARSH What the bloody hell are you?

PAGE NINETEEN

Pic 1
Half the page: BLINDHAIL STATION. Snowmobiles, giant trash containers, Indian woman SIVA crouching on the ice outside. MARSH trudging forward to her/it.

(no dialogue)

Pic 2
Map: locate BLINDHAIL STATION in the north west of SPITZBERGEN.

(no dialogue)

Pic 3
MARSH approaches. We see SIVA has a hammer and chisel in her hands, attacking something in the ice, in front of one DOOR to the station.

SIVA Is this you, Marsh?

MARSH Is what me?

Pic 4
We see she's chiseling up a strata of pinkish material out of the top of the ice. (Marsh leans over and inspects it.)

SIVA Somebody puked out here last night and it froze. Is this you?

MARSH That, Dr Siva, is the puke of someone who's eaten unprocessed meat in the last week, and that sure as hell isn't me.

MARSH That must be Creasy.

PAGE TWENTY

Pic 1
Siva goes back to chiselling, as Marsh walks away towards the DOOR.

SIVA — The new bitch. Tell her we don't decorate the front door of our station with puke. It's uncivilised.

MARSH — What's civilised? We live in bears-that-eat-people country. And you puked in your first week here.

SIVA — I made it to the toilet. I am a professional.

Pic 2
UNPACKING ROOM: just a room with benches, where people can put down their finds and devices from a field trip, and get their coats off. Various containers, hanging pegs, shelves and cases. Also stacks of baggies, sharpies, labels, worksheets… a big FRIDGE.

MARSH stands at a bench. From out of his coat pocket, already bagged, those couple of black flowers he picked are on it.

MARSH — "The trees they grow so high and the leaves they do grow green, And many a cold winter's night my love and I have seen..."

MARSH — ...something something alone have been...

FROM OFF — Are you trying to sing again, Marsh? You've been warned about that.

Pic 3
Close in on the bag of flowers, tight.

(no dialogue)

Pic 4
Zoom right in on one of the flowers, one of the broad petals.

(no dialogue)

Pic 5
Zoom right the fuck in – so we can see tiny metal veins, invisible to the naked eye, in the structure of the petal – and the metal veins look exactly like the slots that opened in the Rio Tree leg. Same shapes, just hooked together.

(no dialogue)

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